

MORE THEATRE REVIEWS: NY

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THIS BEAUTIFUL CITY
at the Vineyard Theatre

If you've been under the vast Colorado sky, where the firmament is

CRITIC'S PICK

so clear the stars look close enough to touch, you have some idea why evangelicals think it's God's country—and why locals won't be so easily driven away. Their uneasy marriage—and the unease evangelicals have with certain types of marriage—is the subject of the Civilians' striking new piece *This Beautiful City*.

In case you missed *Gone Missing* or any of the Civilians' other efforts, the company engages in what it calls "creative investigation of actual experience." And while investigating Colorado Springs, the capital of the evangelical movement, the troupe was greeted with manna from heaven: Ted Haggard, leader of the city's New Life Church and the National Association of Evangelicals, went down in the most sensational of scandals: sex and drugs. Better, hookers and street drugs. Better yet, a gay hustler and crystal meth.

Haggard's fall from cozy Coloradoan grace consumes large chunks of the second act, but in the first we get to know the people of Colorado Springs, who simply think of Haggard as Pastor Ted (or a closet-case antichrist). The city's tapestry is religious, atheist, hippie, and military and features all the conflicts that mix would lend itself to. The script, by Jim Lewis and director Steven Cosson, does well to capture that without depicting shrill insensitivity versus shrill insensitivity.

But it's uncovering lesser-seen details that makes the Civilians invaluable: the way an agnostic youth accepts the church because it's just easier, how a transgendered woman forges a new relationship with God, the cycle in which openness leads to repression leads to openness.

The company (Emily Ackerman, Marsha Stephanie Blake, Brad Heberlee, Brandon Miller, Stephen Plunkett, and Alison Weller) has a way with these roles that's halfway between Method re-enactment and an impression of a close friend.

CAROL ROSEGG



Emily Ackerman and Brad Heberlee in *This Beautiful City*

It's compassionate, but not so much as to bury the cosmic absurdity.

Mixed amongst the interview-style interactions is the work of composer-lyricist Michael Friedman (called upon to churn out some Christian rock shortly after his underappreciated score for *Saved*). Friedman has a rather addictive habit of wedding meandering verses and pulsing pop hooks. Here he has concocted a series of songs and half-songs that zero in on material without bursting out of the evening's framework.

The balance in the writing and playing is admirable. We don't need to be told who's crazy and who has a point. In the more extreme cases, we've decided before we come into the theatre; in the closer calls, it's nice not to feel a thumb on the scale.

Perhaps the best perspective is that of Neil Patel's set. Gazing down from above on Colorado Springs, it's a God's-eye view. We can project what we want onto the individual houses, but mainly we're reminded how little we know of what goes on inside them.

Presented by the Vineyard Theatre and Center Theatre Group

at the Vineyard Theatre, 108 E. 15th St., NYC.

Feb. 22–March 15, Tue., 7 p.m.; Wed.–Sat., 8 p.m.; Sat. and Sun., 3 p.m.

(212) 353-0303 or
www.vineyardtheatre.org.

Reviewed by Adam R. Perlman